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ABSTRACT

Teacher educators from the preservice programs in the Teacher Education and Learning to Teach Study were interviewed about the purposes of their methods courses, using an interview schedule constructed around individual course syllabi. The respondents seem to have complex, hazy, and perhaps unconscious purposes for these courses. Many of the courses include many diverse activities that go beyond the purpose teacher educators described in the interviews. Subject matter figures prominently in these purposes, but little attention is given to these subject matters as active fields of inquiry. The interview generated informative responses about specific purposes for course content but was not successful in providing information about the prior influences on those purposes. (Author)

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Robert E. Floden, G. Williamson McDiarmid,
and Nancy Wiemers

National
Center for Research
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Research Report 89-6

WHAT ARE THEY TRYING TO DO?
PERSPECTIVES ON TEACHER EDUCATORS' PURPOSES

**Robert E. Floden, G. Williamson McDiarmid,
and Nancy Wiemers**

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The NCRTE is committed to improving teacher education through research on its purposes, its character and quality, and its role in teacher learning. NCRTE defines teacher education broadly and includes in its portfolio such diverse approaches as preservice, inservice, and induction programs and alternate routes to teaching.

To further its mission, the NCRTE publishes research reports, issue papers, technical series, conference proceedings, and a newsletter on contemporary issues in teacher education. For more information about the NCRTE or to be placed on its mailing list, please write to the Editor, National Center for Research on Teacher Education, 116 Erickson Hall, Michigan State University, East Lansing, Michigan 48824-1034.

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Abstract

Teacher educators from the preservice programs in the Teacher Education and Learning to Teach Study were interviewed about the purposes of their methods courses, using an interview schedule constructed around individual course syllabi. The respondents seem to have complex, hazy, and perhaps unconscious purposes for these courses. Many of the courses include many diverse activities that go beyond the purposes teacher educators described in the interviews. Subject matter figures prominently in these purposes, but little attention is given to these subject matters as active fields of inquiry. The interview generated informative responses about specific purposes for course content but was not successful in providing information about the prior influences on those purposes.

WHAT ARE THEY TRYING TO DO?
PERSPECTIVES ON TEACHER EDUCATORS' PURPOSES

Robert E. Floden, G. Williamson McDiarmid, and Nancy Wiemers[1]

Questions of educational purpose are always involved, explicitly or implicitly, in the design and interpretation of educational research. Knowledge or assumptions about purpose guide decisions about what outcomes to measure, which processes to observe, and when to measure outcomes. Understandings about purpose also shape inferences about the effectiveness of educational strategies or directions for improvement. Research on teacher education, in particular, has given little attention to questions of purpose. Scholars have repeatedly called attention to the importance of this issue (see references cited in Lanier and Floden, 1978; see also Kliebard, 1973); but the typical response to these pleas has been to conduct research on teaching, not to undertake analytic or empirical studies of teacher education itself. One central intent of the National Center for Research on Teacher Education's (NCRTE) research is to collect information that will move issues of purpose--especially academic purpose--to center stage in the discussions about teacher education.

One can think about purposes on at least two levels--course purposes and program purposes. Course purposes are the goals that the responsible individual or group have for the course. For a course that has been taught by a variety of faculty over many years, one could distinguish between the purposes of those who initially developed the course and the purposes subsequent faculty had for the course when they taught it. When a group of faculty teaches a large course with many sections, it may make sense to think of the group's purposes (as embodied in written documents produced by the group, agreements made in meetings, etc.) as distinct from the purposes of any individual faculty member.

The situation becomes even more complex for program purposes. For a program with a history, the purposes of the original designers is distinct from the purposes of later members of the program staff. At any one time, the purposes expressed in institutional descriptions of the program may be different from those held by the program director (if there is one), which are likely to be different from those held by some or all of the program faculty. Many of the program faculty may not think about the program as a whole, but only concentrate on their own course. In some institutions the various faculty in the program

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may never talk to each other. The question of how the program boundaries should be drawn (e.g., Does the program include the required mathematics course taught in the mathematics department?) adds another dimension of complexity.

Teacher education programs are not likely to have well defined purposes, consistently represented in program documents and endorsed by all program staff. Past studies (e.g., Joyce, Yarger, Howey, Harbeck, and Kluwin, 1977) suggest that a variety of purposes will be represented within a program. Moreover, individual faculty members may claim a variety of purposes for the courses they teach. Given the extraordinary complexity of questions about program purposes, it seems advisable to begin with the simpler issue of course purposes. Therefore, we will focus this paper on the purposes individual faculty members have for the courses they teach. If this study and others like it can build a better understanding of course purposes and how to study them, researchers will be in a better position to examine questions of program purpose.

Despite the importance of purpose, little research has been done to study the purposes teacher educators have for their work. The national survey of preservice programs conducted a decade ago by Joyce and his colleagues (Joyce et al., 1977) included questions about ideology and goals, but the survey responses were puzzling. Most faculty respondents endorsed every purpose they were asked about, a response pattern that "clearly warrants more thorough research in order to be better understood" (Yarger, Howey, and Joyce, 1977, p. 37). A library and ERIC search for research on the purposes of teacher education produced analytic discussions of purposes (e.g., Anglin, Fox, and DeVault, 1981; Crittenden, 1973; Joyce, 1975; Spodek; 1975; Zeichner, 1983) and papers arguing that more attention should be given to purpose (e.g., Kliebard, 1973; Shutes, 1975), but few empirical studies of the purposes held by teacher education faculty. Existing empirical descriptions tend to be impressionistic and superficial (e.g., Reed and Crosby, 1973). A survey study of Michigan State University program faculty (Byers and Freeman, 1983) and Raths and Katz' (1982) study of Illinois social studies methods instructors are notable exceptions.

Why Bother to Understand Teacher Educators' Purposes?

One explanation for the lack of research on teacher educators' purposes is that such investigations are not worth the effort. General statements of purpose are printed in college catalogs and program materials. What benefits are there in seeking more detailed--and perhaps more accurate--answers?

Several different groups would benefit. Understanding each other's purposes better would help teacher educators in their attempts to rethink their enterprise. As public attention is directed to teacher education, such rethinking plays a more visible part in

teacher educators' work, though program revision occurs frequently. Teacher educators who are trying to make their programs more "coherent" have a special need to learn what their colleagues are trying to accomplish. Clients of teacher education programs--students, parents, and those planning to hire teachers--would be able to make more informed choices about programs if they were clearer and more explicit about the purposes of the courses and experiences that make up the program. Often, a program may be selected on the basis of the general reputation of the sponsoring institution--typically a college or university--rather than on the basis of what the faculty are attempting to accomplish.

Those interested in studying or reforming teacher education from the outside could also profit from a better understanding of teacher educators' purposes. Particularly in a field that lacks consensus about desirable outcomes, understanding current practices and their effects is difficult without a fairly good sense of the intentions behind the practices. Thus research on teacher education, like that on teaching, needs to examine purpose as researchers seek to understand current practice and how it might be improved.

For those pursuing change in teacher education, knowledge of what people are currently attempting to accomplish will help determine reformers' actions. Do teacher educators need mostly to be informed about promising new practices because they already share the goals of the reformers? Or do they need to be convinced that other goals are important because they do not currently share the reformers' goals? Or both?

A teacher competency test might seem to be a way of avoiding the need to understand current purposes, because the teacher educators might feel forced to help teachers pass the tests whether or not they shared its goals. But, like other teachers faced with a mandated test, teacher educators who do not share the intent behind the test will have an incentive to teach to the test, rather than teaching to the constructs on which the test is based. Those who wish to produce a genuine reorientation in teacher education need to think about persuading teacher educators to share their vision rather than setting up hoops for them to jump through.

Possible Approaches to the Study of Purpose

Explicit statements provide one version of course purpose. Because these are public declarations, often fashioned for political ends, they are likely to be somewhat rhetorical and aimed at general audiences. Because they are public, these declarations may influence the way people inside and outside the program understand the course. Several factors make it difficult to use surveys to study the purposes of teacher education. First, past surveys (e.g., Byers and Freeman, 1983; Joyce et al., 1977) have found that teacher education faculty are likely to endorse a wide range of goals on a survey. This suggests that probing will be

necessary to sort out how teacher educators manage their actions in light of multiple--possibly conflicting--purposes. Second, probing will probably also be necessary to understand how faculty perceive a particular goal (e.g., "giving teachers a thorough grounding in academic subjects") and why some goals may be preferred over other goals. Third, designing good survey items would require knowledge of how faculty think about the differences among different goals. As indicated above, since little empirical research has been done on the goals faculty members hold, the basis for designing survey items has yet to be established.

In one of the best previous studies of teacher educators' purposes, Raths and Katz (1982) distributed a survey that asked social studies methods instructors to describe their course goals and the attributes of successful social studies teachers. Raths and Katz interpret the apparent contradiction between responses to these two items as an indication that "methods instructors pursue goals they seem convinced make little difference to their students' ultimate success and competence as teachers" (p. 280). Another possible interpretation--which credits these teacher educators with somewhat more sense--is that these survey questions did not yield a valid picture of their respondents' purposes.

Interviewing, which allows the researcher to probe teacher educators' statements of purpose, thus seems a more appropriate strategy. A direct, commonsense approach to determine purpose in teacher education is tempting: "Let's just *ask* them what their purposes are." Educators, after all, are often asked to describe the objectives for their course or program. While the commonsense approach produces results, it yields answers that are not satisfying. Questions like, "What are you trying to do in this program?" or "What sort of teachers are you trying to prepare?" elicit general replies, often well laced with the current rhetoric--these days, filled with terms like "reflective," "richly literate," "professional," and "strong intellectual grounding." Such responses are little more than slogans (see Scheffler, 1960) that signal affiliation with a particular group without communicating much of substance.

The direct approach, then, has two major weaknesses. First, it tends to elicit phrases that are part of the lexicon currently in vogue without providing information about how those phrases are meant (if they indeed serve any function other than to signal that the speaker is up on the latest developments). Second, the direct question evokes a general response that may mask the diversity of fairly distinct purposes that characterize some programs.

A Syllabus-Guided Interview

To address these problems, the NCRTE has developed an interview schedule constructed around individual course syllabi. Before the interview, the interviewer asks the

respondent to bring along a syllabus for the course. In the main body of the interview,[2] the interviewer asks the teacher educator to

> imagine that I [the interviewer] am a colleague who has been enlisted to take over your course while you're on sabbatical. I'm meeting with you to get background on the course and a sense of the content of the course. I'm in the process of developing my own syllabus.

The interviewer shows the teacher educator an outline of the topics to be covered in discussing the syllabus, then proceeds through each part, with probes intended to press for comments about: what the students would learn, what reasons the teacher educator had for choosing the particular content, readings, or assignments; and, what criteria the teacher educator uses to judge success in the course.[3] The topics covered are as follows:

- Class time and course summary
- Texts and/or readings
- Objectives
- Schedule of topics
- Course requirements and assignments
- Evaluation and grading,
- Instructional context (e.g., relationship between this course and the rest of the program, other responsibilities of this teacher educator).

In constructing and pilot testing this interview schedule, we attempted to address the two problems of the direct approach discussed above. Our strategy in the interview schedule was to approximate the chunks of instruction that typify teacher educators' thinking. General questions about broad goals usually elicit vague, abstract responses because teacher educators seldom think at this global level; they must, however, consider specific questions about individual topics, assignments, and readings.

We hoped that the tendency to speak in broad stock phrases would thus be reduced by grounding the discussion in teacher educators' practice. What do you do in this part of this course? What do you hope the students will learn from this particular reading? How

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[2]The interviews were specifically tailored for each site, based on the judgments of our research staff with the most experience in the site. In most cases, the alterations were little more than changing the line about sabbatical replacement to a suggestion that the interviewer was about to become a new member of the staff. In a few cases, however, this role-playing approach was not used.

[3]To aid in linking the beliefs and attitudes of the teacher educators to those of students in their programs, we end the interview by asking for reactions to some of vignettes we use in interviewing teacher education students, and for reactions to some of the typical responses given by such students. In this paper, we will not consider responses to these vignettes.

do you evaluate your students on this assignment? Not only are such questions concrete and specific, but teacher educators have probably already thought about these issues as they planned, reviewed, or revised the course. Directing the interview to specific assignments and readings also enables the teacher educators to describe a variety of individual objectives, rather than having to come up with broad statements to cover the entire course. This approach is more likely to tap ideas that the respondents have considered prior to the interview rather than requiring them to figure out on the spot what the course as a whole is intended to achieve.[4]

Some Initial Results

We illustrate what might, and what probably cannot, be learned by this interview approach, drawing from the transcripts of interviews with eight college-based preservice teacher educators. To provide controlled variation in the respondents, we selected two individuals from each of four institutions. In each institution we will only consider courses in the elementary (or early childhood) programs. The institutions include an Ivy League school (with a tiny education program), a program at a state university whose descriptions stress an emphasis on the role of subject matter, a program at another state university whose descriptions emphasize a reliance on educational research, and a program at a university with an open-enrollment policy. At each institution we have drawn on responses from one instructor for a course that devotes significant time to language arts methods and from another instructor who teaches a course aimed in large part at helping teachers teach mathematics.[5]

This set of interviews includes examples that can be used to illustrate many of the somewhat abstract categories that have been used to describe teacher education purposes. Examining the language that teacher educators use to describe their intentions provides some insights into the possible utility and probable limitations of these categories. In the discussion that follows these examples, we will consider both what these results suggest about strategies for studying teacher educators' purposes and what they might contribute to current discussions about the future direction of teacher education.

Subject matter-specific, generic, and nonacademic. Much of the current public discussions of teacher education revolve around the place of subject matter in teacher

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[4]Of course, it may be that teacher educators have selected some activities, topics, or readings without giving much thought to what their students would learn. The literature on teacher planning suggests that these teacher educators probably seldom *start* by thinking about their objectives, but learning goals typically do play *some* role in planning, especially for experienced teachers (Clark and Peterson, 1986; Fuller, 1967).

[5]Not all programs have courses readily identifiable as "math methods" or "language arts methods." Since the intent in this paper is to examine a diverse set of responses, the lack of comparable course categories poses little problem. It does suggest, however, the difficulties that anyone faces in trying to make cross-program comparisons at the level of individual courses.

education. Some critics are concerned that teacher education is not sufficiently oriented toward preparing teachers to raise pupils' academic achievement. Other discussions revolve around whether teacher education treats subject matter generically rather than helping teachers gain the "pedagogical content knowledge" that would help them teach specific subjects (Wilson, Shulman, and Richert, 1987). By selecting respondents who teach methods courses, we seem more likely to get responses that give a prominent role to subject matter, even to methods for teaching particular topics. While that is in general the case, the particular purposes expressed suggest that the distinction between topic-specific and generic is not easily drawn.

All of the respondents gave most attention to purposes that were linked to pupils' academic learning; that is, no one only said that the course was intended to help teachers understand themselves better, to be more reflective, to act like professionals, or to help make teachers more aware of persistent social problems. Though some of these purposes were mentioned, most attention was given to purposes directly linked to the academic purposes of teaching. In fact, most of these teacher educators mentioned *only* purposes directly tied to academic instruction.

The only strictly nonacademic purposes cited had to do with loving children, personal enjoyment (of teaching or of the teacher education class), or (in one case) with getting a sense of yourself as a person. This general orientation suggests--at least for methods courses--that critics who attack teacher education for ignoring the role of schooling in society may have grounds for their criticisms. And the "teacher education as personal growth" approach made famous by Coombs (Coombs, Blume, Newman, and Wass, 1974) seems to receive scant attention in these courses. The teacher educators in this sample seem not to deserve the criticism that they pay little attention to helping teachers learn to teach their subjects. The following quotations illustrate the few non-academic purposes mentioned:

- Students should learn "a love for the children, and a love for the teaching profession." (Leola, p. 11)[6]

- One of the objectives is to have fun. . . . Let's enjoy ourselves, and let's not take ourselves too seriously here. You guys have done the important stuff, which is [student] teaching, now take this time to really enjoy and think and create. (Myra, p. 3)

- I hope they would learn . . . that it's a lot of work to teach. It's a lot of work. I hope they would learn that most of learning how to teach has to do with facing yourself, your assumptions, your fears, your . . . attitudes toward kids. (Myra, p. 13)

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[6]All references to excerpts from interviews are referenced using the respondent's pseudonym and the page in the typed version of the transcript.

Most of the purposes these teacher educators express are either subject matter-specific or related to learning a (typically unspecified) range of subject matter. The set of specific purposes teacher educators mention suggests that deciding just what "subject matter-specific" means may prove difficult. Some purposes are clearly generic, concerning general ideas about learning, about differences among pupils, and about general tools for lesson planning:

- [Students should learn that] there are a variety of ways to teach anything, and that . . . you want to use as many ways as possible so that you can probably teach to different modalities of learning. (Leona, p. 17)

- [Students should learn that] all learning begins with concrete experiences, leading more to an abstract, and then when they design their [instruction] they would keep that in mind. (Leona, p. 15)

- I hope they can learn that they can teach just about any subject matter given the time to prepare, because of their liberal arts background. And that they could read several different books, analyze what children need at certain different levels, and then [plan] appropriate lessons based on that. (Maggi, p. 6)

A few statements of purpose seem to resemble what Buchmann (1984), Shulman (1986), and others seem to be calling for: trying to give teachers an understanding of how particular topics in a subject area might be represented for teaching, or the basis of inquiry underlying a particular subject area, or of the difficulties pupils are likely to have:

- [Teachers should learn that] mathematics is about conjecturing, and validating conjectures. So you analyze the situation, you conjecture, you validate your conjecture, and then you apply that conjecture, or that validation, which we might now call a theorem or a procedure. (Justin, p. 23)

- [To teach two-digit multiplication to fifth graders, teachers need to learn to] try to think about what kinds of questions the children might ask, and what the stumbling blocks might be, if there were any. For example, knowing facts, knowing how to carry types of information, and how to put the numbers on the page. (Maggi, p. 25)

But statements of purpose that seem to embody scholars' calls for more pedagogical content knowledge rarely emerge. The last quotation may not even represent this type of knowledge, for the respondent may be referring to a generic ability or disposition to think about possible stumbling blocks, rather than to stumbling blocks pupils typically run into in

learning a specific idea or procedure. Most of the statements of purpose are more difficult to characterize. They refer to specific subject matter but in a general way. They leave unclear whether what they want students to learn is unique to the subject area of interest, or whether the subject matter is merely the context for teaching some general pedagogical methods.

Sometimes teacher educators say that they intend to influence teachers' attitudes toward the particular subject matter. They wish to have teachers develop a love of writing. They set their sights a bit lower for math, merely hoping to reduce teachers' anxiety. In some cases, the positive affect is thought to derive from the teacher understanding the subject to be taught; in other cases, its source seems to be a more diffuse liking or comfort. One teacher educator wanted her students in math

- to feel comfortable with the different formulas used, or, like, if you went somewhere there'd be commutative property of addition, OK. That would be something that you'd know. . . . Just feeling comfortable with those kinds of things. (Leona, p. 12)

Another teacher educator wanted her students in writing to learn

- Number 1 to love and appreciate writing and number 2 to be able to help kids love to write. . . . [In] the best of all possible worlds a student would come away from my class feeling really good about themselves as a writer, having published something, self publish something, feeling really good about their abilities to get children excited about writing, feeling really good about their abilities to teach writing in response to what kids do in a classroom. (Sharleen, pp. 10, 13)

Some statements of purpose indicate that teachers will learn the methods needed to teach the variety of topics in the subject but do not indicate whether or not this range of methods could be equally well applied in teaching other subjects or other topics (i.e., topics not currently part of the standard curriculum, such as transformational geometry in mathematics or choice of printer fonts in writing).

- [Students should learn] the skills and the methodologies that you can use to teach the program from . . . prekindergarten up through about eighth grade. . . . They need to have those kind of range of skills to know those content and those topics to work on that. (Stockton, p. 11)

- [Students should learn] a world of methods for teaching reading is what they really need (Leola, p. 6).

- [Students should learn] that the first ingredient is a really well designed task to turn the students loose on. That the nature of the task itself has to be one that raises the opportunity for students to puzzle about things in a productive way. . . . It's got to be a situation that is going to be very informative to us, that will move us forward in our sort of basic understanding of this set of related mathematical ideas. . . . The most important message is that these activities have to have a fundamental mathematical reason for being. (Justin, pp. 25, 27)

Other statements of purpose indicate that teacher educators want students to learn a particular way of teaching a particular subject or topic. These differ from the previous group in that they specifically link the teaching method to specific content. They still leave open the possibility, however, that the method might have wider application.

- [In learning to teach writing, students should learn that] the instruction has to do with a regular predictable format that engages kids. . . . There is the direct instruction provided by the teacher, followed by the kids' independent writing and interacting with the teacher, and then the sharing of the text with other kids. . . . And then there is also the specific concern with elements of the stages of the process of generating text, so then you can talk about inventing a topic. (Jed, pp. 11-12)

- [In learning to teach reading comprehension, students should learn that] comprehension is something that you learn . . . by . . . reading texts that are not artificial texts staged for the sake of exercises, but are posed as legitimate texts with beginning, middles and ends to stories, or beginnings, middles and ends to an argument about animals, biology or whatever. . . . Comprehension is learned . . . by talking, discussing the text as you read it. (Jed, pp. 8, 11)

Still other statements have to do with providing exposure to, familiarity with, or understanding of some concept central to the subject matter or how that subject matter should be taught. The connections to teaching practice are left unspecified, as befits a purpose aimed at changing students' beliefs rather than their actions. One teacher educator chose a particular book for her class "to give them a perspective on whole language" (Sharleen, p. 12). Another teacher educator wanted "to give them [her students] an understanding of the terminology, terminology used, to have them feel comfortable with presenting mathematical concepts from Pre-K to four grade. To involve them with an understanding of the different math concepts" (Leona, p. 12).

The question of whether any of the things they are trying to teach are subject matter-specific is probably of little moment to these teacher education practitioners. These courses are about teaching particular subjects, but their decisions about what to include are likely governed by what they think important for teaching that subject (that students won't master

sufficiently elsewhere) rather than by judgments about whether the content is, as it were, unique to the subject.

In one interview based on a course that covers methods for teaching several different subjects, our interviewer pressed the respondent on the question of instructional differences among school subjects and how those would require different knowledge for the teacher. As you can see, the respondent has a sense that the two subjects make different demands on the teacher, but the only concrete examples have to do with the fact that the teacher would have to know the content (which actually constitutes a similarity since both subjects require knowledge of the content to be taught) and that mathematics typically relies more on lecture and social studies more on discussion.

I: If . . . teaching math is different than teaching social studies, what are the kinds of things you'd like them to know about the differences in teaching those two subjects?

R: First of all, the content. And, um, how that is different. And also the procedure. Teaching a math lesson might be very different in terms of direction and instruction than a social studies class, which might be more discussion or a small group activity. . . .

I: So, again, what would you want them to know, to have learned about teaching a math lesson?

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R: A social studies lesson may not depend so much on the presentation of material as math would. . . . For example, there are certain steps that you would need to outline in detail in teaching that multiplication lesson that there might not be in the social studies lesson. It might be related to one specific concept, rather than a list of steps that you would teach in a skill. . . . They would also need to try to think about what kinds of questions the children might ask, and what the stumbling blocks might be, if there were any. For example, knowing facts, knowing how to carry types of information, and, um, how to put the numbers on the page.

I: . . . Is that something you would want teachers to anticipate in the social studies lesson, or is it different?

R: I think that there are certain anticipations in terms of problems that they have. So, in that way, it, it's not that different. It's just that the subject matter is a more discussion-type of subject, rather than a lecture. (Maggi, pp. 24-26)

Considering How Subject-Specific Teacher Education Should Be

This small sample of interviews provokes some thoughts about the ways in which subject matter knowledge might figure into elementary methods courses. The purposes these teacher educators espouse for these methods courses seem neither to address the calls for teaching pedagogical content knowledge (e.g., representations and likely student errors for specific subject matter topics) nor to warrant the charge that "American schools of education are conceived on the principle that pedagogy itself is a skill that can be applied to all subject matter" (Hirsch, 1989, p. 29). Rather, many of the espoused subject-matter purposes expressed in these interviews appear to fall somewhere between--aimed to help students learn to use methods that seem well suited to particular topics in the subject area but that might also be used to teach other topics, in the same or different subject areas.

The context in which these teacher educators work may actually necessitate rationales that operate in this ground. Elementary teachers typically teach the full range of academic subjects, and prospective teachers can rarely predict accurately the grade level at which they will teach. Thus teacher educators recognize that their students may teach reading, other language arts, math, science, social studies, and sometimes art, music, and physical education at any level from kindergarten to eighth grade (depending on the certification structure in the state). Teacher educators seldom have much more than one year (considerably less in some states) of full-time study in which to provide this preparation, and a large block of time must be reserved for student teaching. This combination of limited time and uncertainty about the knowledge and skills that graduates will require clearly precludes acquisition of detailed pedagogical content knowledge across the full range of subject matters.

Faced with such circumstances, some teacher educators opt to help prospective teachers develop a set of generic teaching methods that, they reason, could then be used to teach any topic. Some researchers (e.g., Gage, 1978) have argued that generic skills are important, and some skills (e.g., how to establish rules for classroom behavior) might well be topic independent. But others (e.g., McDiarmid, Ball, and Anderson, 1989; Shulman, 1986) have mounted arguments that the pedagogical knowledge and skill needed to teach about the Civil Rights movement will not serve to teach about the commutative law of addition. How, then, is it possible to arrive at a middle position that will help teachers face the wide range of topics with appropriate instructional approaches?

Research on learning has been struggling with a similar tension. When one considers the wide variety of problems individuals must face in life, the best approach may be to help them learn general cognitive skills that can be adapted to fit the particular case at hand. Research on learning, however, has often shown that skills are context-bound; students show remarkably little transfer of skill from one context to another or one problem to another.

In a fascinating recent review of this literature, Perkins and Solomon (1989) trace the fall and rise of belief in transfer of general cognitive skills. They conclude with a sketch of a middle position that gives prominence to both general and local knowledge. They suggest that general principles can be transferred to new context situations provided that either the skill has been practiced to the point of automaticity in a variety of situations or that the learners are urged to see both the general principle and the specific application as they learn a skill. When encouraged to decontextualize some principles, individuals are better able to remember the principle in a different context.

In a similar way, teachers who learn a method for teaching place value might thereby be learning something about how to teach photosynthesis, provided the proper conditions for transfer are established. The statements of purpose elicited so far do not provide the detail necessary to judge whether they are working along the lines suggested by Perkins and Solomon (1989). A more careful examination of the ways methods instructors try to provide both specific methods and general teaching strategies might reveal some promising settings for exploring questions of transfer in teacher preparation. At any event, it is inaccurate to say that subject matter has been ignored in teacher education--at least in the espoused purposes of this sample of elementary methods class instructors (and such courses make up a large part of professional programs).

Interim Summary: The Promise of the Syllabus Strategy

The preceding examples and discussion suggest several things about this syllabus-guided interview as a strategy for learning about teacher educators' instructional purposes. First, compared with asking general questions (e.g., "What are your goals?") or examining institutional descriptions, this strategy seems to produce responses that are more specific and more differentiated. The responses clearly depart from catch-phrases about professionalism, reflection, and quality. They also reveal the multidimensionality of purpose that we expected.

The responses, even in this small set of interviews, moreover help to push forward discussions about the general directions teacher education might take. Considering what teacher educators are currently attempting to achieve helps to move discussion from sweeping statements about the lack of attention to subject matter to the more difficult--and perhaps more important--questions about just what sorts of attention to subject matter would be most appropriate. Critics seem off base in claiming that teacher education promotes only generic teaching skills. Methods instructors must be puzzled to hear that they should pay attention to subject matter. A discussion of alternative ways for helping teachers prepare to teach the range of topics they may encounter would probably be more productive. The critics may find that some of their wishes have already been granted. These interviews

suggest, however, that they will not find everything as they would wish. Only two of the twelve respondents made any statements that suggested attention to these subject matters as active fields of inquiry; one of those suggested that math was basically "cut and dried."

Despite their relative richness, these responses were characterized by certain limitations. First, they seldom allowed us to understand the thinking that underlies such purposes as getting teachers to love kids or to know the steps of the writing process. Without some sense of the rationale behind these purposes, judging the value of a purpose is difficult. If one prefers other purposes, one needs to know the rationales for competing purposes to discuss these differences. Without such reasoned discussions, the preference for one purpose or another then seems more like a preference for chocolate (rather than vanilla) ice cream than like a professional judgement among curricula choices.

Our interview protocol included probes intended to elicit statements about the reasoning behind specific purposes. We hoped that teacher educators would take these opportunities to talk about books, articles, ideas, or experiences that had shaped their thinking, about influential colleagues and mentors, or about legal and administrative constraints. The most frequent response so far, however, seems to be that their decisions about the course are based on their beliefs about what is important to do.

These statements do not imply that these respondents have merely idiosyncratic grounds for their decisions about their courses. More likely, their judgments have been influenced by a variety of sources, many of which might constitute plausible rationales. At the time we asked these questions, however, they may have incorporated those influences into their thinking and based their course decisions on their current beliefs and convictions, rather than on the grounds that originally led them to those decisions. This interview approach seems inadequate for uncovering those earlier influences. Psychological research on people's awareness of the sources of changes in their own beliefs (e.g., Nisbett and Wilson, 1977), provides little hope that an accurate account of these past influences can ever be obtained solely by retrospective interviews.

Although more detailed than "preparing reflective teachers," the responses we received often seem to remain at the level of rubrics. A rule of thumb for judging specificity might be whether the statement would allow another teacher educator to decide which assignments or methods of assessment would be appropriate. This touchstone might also serve to address another question that could be raised about this approach to eliciting teacher educators' rationales; that is, the interview might be tapping rationales about purposes that do not actually figure into how the respondents think about their courses.

Discrepancies that arise as inquiry moves closer to the curriculum actually taught may be interpreted in two different ways. One interpretation is that every step toward the implemented curriculum moves nearer to the "real" purposes of the course. The second is

that these differences are the result of (sometimes unavoidable) discrepancies between intention and practice. Few people do all the things and only the things that further their purposes; teacher educators are unlikely to prove exceptions.

As a part of these syllabus-based interviews, we moved one more step in this direction. We asked these instructors what assignments they gave and how they evaluated students. Responses will likely still depart in some aspects from the assignments and evaluation criteria used in the course in any particular term.[7] Considering what information these questions generate, however, gives a sense of how this strategy might provide additional information.

Inferring purpose from assignments and evaluation methods is tricky business. The specific activities in teacher education represent attempts to manage a variety of goals under circumstances of severe restraint. Teachers--like all people--cannot be expected to achieve all their purposes, for time is too short and purposes too numerous and varied. Given these constraints, the curriculum of a teacher education course is likely to look more like a series of potentially worthwhile activities than like a clearly defined strategy.

Assignments and Evaluation

In the stereotypical college class, the instructor lectures and occasionally asks questions of students; students take notes and occasionally might answer the instructor's questions. Student involvement is primarily limited to the reproduction (on midterm and final exams) of information the instructor gives in class. Innovative classes may include a project or a paper. We looked at the assignments teacher educators give to students in their classes to see how well this stereotype fits preservice preparation.

The picture that emerges is quite different. Teacher candidates are busy with a variety of assignments. Although most instructors give midterms and finals, students are involved in a variety of other activities. Preservice teachers do lesson plans, bulletin boards, critical analyses of journal articles, and concept maps, among other things. Through these assignments, teacher educators try to impart to students some understanding about the practice of teaching and some things teachers need to know to do their job. Teacher educators justify their assignments by citing what they think preservice teachers need to know, but they don't agree on what that is; hence, the somewhat bewildering variety of assignments. Elementary math teacher candidates need to understand the structure of disciplinary knowledge as well as build up a file of math games which they can use in their

[7]As part of our study, we are also observing in some teacher education classes, including the classes of many of the teacher educators we interviewed. Analysis of those observations should give us a better idea about the ways in which the instruction delivered departs from this part of the interview. Since our resources typically only allow one visit to each class, however, most of the activities described in the interviews will not be observed.

classrooms. They need to design a mini-lesson and then teach it and think about lesson planning in broader terms.

Of course, types of assignments differ for different classes--issues are not necessarily the same in educational psychology as they are in language arts methods. But, based on our examination of the variety of tasks assigned in similar types of classes, many teacher educators appear to be trying to do it all. We will look at the kinds of assignments teacher educators give to students and the rationales behind them. We will examine how journals, in particular, which are common assignments in all types of teacher education classes, are used and why teacher educators consider them an important part of their course work.

In terms of evaluation, the criteria for measuring preservice teacher performance appear diverse. Some teacher educators have detailed rationales for their grades, while others talk about using a "general impression in marking." Some stress neatness and mechanics in written work, because they think those are criteria by which teachers will be judged, while others concern themselves with how well students synthesize information. Students' written work is often evaluated on skills they are expected to have gained from prior experience; such things as organization of material, structure of argument or clarity of writing. Students are often asked to do a great number of projects and written assignments yet are given a grade weighted heavily toward their performance on a multiple choice exam. Criteria for evaluation are not uniform within the different types of courses or across courses. We will look at the ways teacher educators talk about evaluating student work.

Types of Assignments

Teacher candidates do a lot of work. In a sample of 17 interviews,[8] 38 different types of written work or projects were described as requirements for courses. No course requires a midterm and final exam alone, and few limit themselves to only one written paper or project. Written work or projects are required in addition to whatever reading and class participation is expected of students. Students are required to write papers comparing educational philosophers, review books or articles, analyze what they observed in classrooms, or reflect on themselves as learners. They are also required to make math games, design puppet plays, create film guides, and evaluate basal readers.

Two categories of assignments appear: those designed to increase students' analytic or conceptual understanding of what occurs in classrooms, and those designed to give students concrete skills to use in classrooms. Some educators emphasize that their students become critically aware of what happens in classrooms. They may assign students to write papers on the "intended, enacted, and actual" curriculum of their mentor teachers'

[8]In the remainder of this paper, we draw on a slightly larger sample of interviews conducted to date.

classrooms to help them analyze what they see and experience. Other teacher educators gear their assignments to the "practical" realities of classroom work. One math methods teacher talked about why she requires her students to create a picture file:

> Well, I guess it [my justification] is twofold. Number one is to get the students into the practice very early of collecting material, visual material, so that when they really go out to teach, to do their practice teaching, they will have tools that are ready for them. And I guess the second thing is to ah, get them started in using a lot of A/V material with hands-on for children. That's very important, I think, in teaching. (Leola, pp. 20-21)

It would be convenient if the type of work assigned corresponded to the type of course--philosophy papers in foundation classes and idea files in methods classes--or to the type of institution (research vs. "normal" school). But no such handy division is apparent. Language arts methods courses require some of the following assignments: handwriting proficiency projects, maps of classrooms, picture files, critically annotated bibliographies of juvenile novels, creative writing projects, lesson plans, critiques of textbooks, and readability test analyses. One child development instructor requires students to write papers analyzing Piaget's views because understanding different views of developmental learning is important knowledge for elementary teachers. Another child development instructor in a similar type of institution requires students to keep records of their own attendance to be handed in because "one of the skills you need to have as an effective and good teacher is being accurate on the records and forms in your schools" (Grant, p. 31). Although to some degree the predominance of one type of assignment over the other--that is, more concrete skills over analytic skills--is predictable in the different institutions we looked at, many courses in all these preservice programs include some of each type.

Examining the assignments given to preservice teachers suggests a picture of educators trying hard to prepare students for teaching. Few, if any, feel that providing information for students and having them demonstrate their "learning" of it on exams is adequate in their courses. They assign work designed to help students acquire the skills, dispositions, mental tools or physical items teachers think that novice teachers need. But, no consensus exists among teacher educators within institutions or within disciplines as to what this "stuff" is that preservice teachers need to know to be prepared to teach.

Journal writing. One common course assignment in all areas and institutions is journal writing. One teacher educator complained that her students were just "over-journaled" and indeed half of the teacher educators whose interviews we analyzed require their students to write journals during their courses. Teacher educators use journal writing in several ways. Many ask students to analyze in their journals the ideas presented in class,

school observations, and course reading. Students are expected to synthesize what they are learning from different arenas. One elementary methods instructor said: "That's what they are supposed to do in the journal. They're to take what happens in the classroom, along with their reading for that particular week and put the two together and try to figure out what's going on" (Maggi, p. 20). Although some instructors ask students to include how they feel about the ideas presented, many primarily want them to chronicle the ideas of the course in their journals.

Other instructors ask students to use journal writing to reflect on what they are observing in classrooms or on their own practice teaching. One instructor of a language arts methods course with a fieldwork component uses journal writing to help students make sense of their fieldwork experiences:

> And then at the end of that [the fieldwork placement], I require that the students make some effort to reach closure. In other words, go back and look at all the journal entries up to that point and figure out what they've learned or how they feel about what they're doing or that kind of thing. (Slade, p. 17)

Journal writing is one way in which students can record their reactions to classroom observations or fieldwork experiences. As another teacher educator put it, journal writing is "writing to learn" instead of "writing to reflect learning" as many assignments are.

Journal writing appears to have dual value in the eyes of these teacher educators. It encourages students to make sense of their field experiences or record their ideas about course readings. At the same time, it also seems to symbolize, for students, faculty concern or engagement. A language arts methods teacher who thought that students were "over-journaled" decided to drop journal writing in her methods class for a term. She liked this idea because responding to students' journals is a time-consuming activity:

> I said I wasn't going to do journals and then the first day I asked the students to write little autobiographies and tell me a little bit about themselves. . . . Well, three of the students said things that moved me [so] I went down to Chestnut's that night, bought 50 folders, stapled paper into them and said they had better [do journals] . . . [and] this one student said it is so nice to have a professor who cares where we have been and where we are going. I thought, oh, you know, what can I do? (Sharleen, p. 24)

Many of the instructors talked about the concern with which they read journals and the insight into their students that journals provide. Journal assignments, it appears, may be as important for what they represent to students as for their pedagogical purposes.

Evaluation

Diversity in how teacher educators evaluate assignments is as great as the diversity in the assignments themselves. The criteria with which instructors judge the merit of students' work range from neatness to "involved and in-depth thought." As with assignments, no single standard for assessment within an institution or within a discipline is evident. From some interviews, a large discrepancy emerges between the commitment and enthusiasm with which instructors talk about assignments or the work students do in class and the weight that work carries in determining grades.

Almost all teachers stress how much they look at class participation and attendance, yet few give it more than token value in their grading schemes. A language arts methods instructor assigns five papers which he claims are very valuable, but to which he assigns but a total of 15 percent of the student's grade; 40 percent is determined by exams. A child development instructor told the students that the first part of the class was ungraded "to free us for three or four weeks to learn and explore without concern about grades." He reluctantly gives exams because "we have to test, we have to grade and so, here are the rules of the testing game" (Grant, p. 32). Instructors talk a great deal about the importance of journal writing, yet most journals are graded as credit/no credit. What value do students place on projects and papers that play little role in determining their final grade and what mixed messages does such lack of valuation impart to prospective teachers? If projects and papers are indeed the "stuff" which teacher educators want their students to attend to in making sense of teaching, why do they count for so little?

The Place of Purpose in Teacher Education

What is the significance of these vague and sometimes apparently contradictory responses about course purpose? What do these responses suggest about teacher education courses, about the courses' likely impact, and about the processes by which courses might be changed? Teacher education courses seem to be activities with complex, hazy, and perhaps unconscious purposes. The catalog description of a course's main purposes probably leaves out much that is intended, capturing perhaps only a fraction of the specific purposes that motivate the numerous course assignments. These assignments may have been included for a variety of reasons, some of which have little relationship to the ostensible major purposes of the course.

Many factors could contribute to this somewhat muddled situation. To some extent, it may simply be an instance of a general human tendency to maintain a loose connection between specific actions and broad purposes. This general inclination may be exacerbated by a institutional system that presses for sweeping outcomes (e.g., being prepared to teach any elementary school mathematics topic to any group of children) in a limited time (e.g.,

one or two college courses). Difficulties in talking about purpose may also add to the apparent muddle.

Whatever the reason, the fact that courses have nebulous or inconsistent purposes raises questions about whether they are likely to have conspicuous effects on students. If students are uncertain what they are supposed to be learning, they may be less likely devote their energies toward mastering particular knowledge or skill. If course activities are designed to serve a diverse set of purposes, what students learn may not aggregate to any easily observed change. Questions of the relationship between overall course purposes, the purposes of specific activities, and student learning deserve empirical study.

The results of these interviews also raise questions about the processes of curriculum change in teacher education. The current vagueness of overall course purposes and the differences between these purposes and specific course activities both indicate that reformers must work to push change through to the level of weekly instruction. Changes in course descriptions may bear little resemblance to changes in the specific learning tasks of teacher education. Even where teacher educators enthusiastically endorse the general directions of reform, the specifics of their instruction may take a different path.

In this study, we have begun to examine the purposes teacher educators espouse for their courses. The syllabus-guided interview strategy seems a promising tool for such research, but does not yield crisp descriptions that can be categorized or linked to program characteristics or student outcomes. As this line of work proceeds, it must formulate questions that fit both with the importance of purpose in education and with the role such purposes play in teacher education practice.

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